

## So This Is The Aftermath by nyctanthes

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Gen

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Dustin Henderson, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Byers Family, Will Byers & Jonathan Byers, Will Byers & Joyce Byers, Will Byers & Mike Wheeler

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2018-11-30

**Updated:** 2018-11-30

**Packaged:** 2022-04-23 03:06:53

**Rating:** General Audiences

**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 3,404

**Publisher:** archiveofourown.org

**Summary:**

He has two notebooks. One is displayed prominently on his bedside table. In it he draws wizards, dragons, rogues and elves. Trolls and dwarves, castles and moats. Longbows and shortbows, shortswords and longswords.

The other, he keeps under his mattress.

## So This Is The Aftermath

### Author's Note:

Not beta-ed. All mistakes are mine.

It's November, and he's back in the hospital. The symptoms: severe dehydration, a raging flu that threatens to turn into pneumonia, a red, weeping flesh wound that looks like someone stubbed out their cigar on his stomach. The treatment: antibiotics, painkillers, gauze, IV fluids, warm sponge baths and *Rest, rest, rest*.

For two days, he doesn't get out of bed. For two days, he barely wakes up. He hasn't slept peacefully in quite some time. He hasn't slept alone in quite some time.

"Will, did you know you've been peeing through a tube!"

"Dustin! Give him some privacy. God, we can't take you anywhere."

"My interest, Mike, is purely scientific. I'm thinking about going to medical school."

The nurses remember him.

"Oh, you poor dear. This isn't a lucky time of year for you, is it?"

While Mom and Jonathan doze and his eyes are shut they murmur to each other: at the nurses' station outside his open door, at his bedside as they fiddle with drips and tubes and plastic bags.

"Better than last year..."

"After almost losing him once you'd think she..."

"And did you hear what happened to..."

They brace themselves for a visit from the county social worker, but Hopper takes care of that problem for them.

He goes home. At the threshold he hovers: one foot in, one foot out.

He might have stayed there, suspended, a fly in amber; but Jonathan - juggling two grocery bags, his hospital duffel and a case of Old Milwaukee - plows him straight through the door.

\*

After a couple of weeks at home he's allowed to receive visitors other than Mike. After a month he's allowed to leave the house to do something other than attend school. He goes to Mike's: his best friend, his confidant, his rock and anchor. They hole up in the basement. Shortly after, Lucas and Dustin arrive.

He heaves a sigh of content. Back to normal.

"It's not just *any* girls."

"Dustin, you've got to stop thinking of them as girls, and start thinking of them as members who can drop kick all of our enemies, human or not, into next week. Because they can."

"Plus, how can you deny Mike the chance to see El?"

"All right. All right! But as soon as they start talking about Ralph Macchio, or shaving their legs or eye shadow or anything like that, they are banned. Forever. No take backs."

"They're not going to talk about that shit, Dustin! Girls don't talk about that stuff in front of boys. And El doesn't know who he is. When has she had time to see *The Karate Kid*? She's been stuck in that stupid cabin for months. She's never even been to the movies!"

"First, that is the saddest thing I've ever heard. Second, Steve says...."

Mike growls with frustration. His folding chair creaks as he waves his arms around.

"Stop talking about Steve! You're the only one who thinks his opinion is important. That he knows so much about girls."

“Because he did such a good job with your sister, right Mike?”

Lucas snickers. Dustin rolls his eyes - *Not this again* - secure in the knowledge they're just jealous he's the only one cool enough to be friends with a high schooler.

Mike, on the other hand, is offended.

“Lucas, shut up! I didn't ask for your help.”

Lucas forgets that Mike doesn't want other people, even if they have a stake in the outcome, fighting his battles for him. Not unless he's specifically asked for them to step in. Mike's forever the DM.

Eyes sour and lips pursed, like he's just sucked on a lemon, Lucas thrusts his neck forward, hands on hips, elbows at sharp angles. “Y'know, maybe Dustin's got a point.” With each syllable he gets progressively louder. “Maybe I should be asking if it's safe for Max to come over. Is your ‘girlfriend,’” he air quotes, “going to get crazy stupid jealous – again - and knock her down? Or throw her into the wall?” Put down delivered, he leans back in his chair, folds his arms across his chest and smirks knowingly at Mike.

Mike forgets that Lucas lets him be the DM.

Mike's so mad he doesn't have a snappy comeback. Or a lame one. Instead, he sits there, outraged and sputtering. His hands clench into fists, his arms press into the card table. They rattle the dice, knock over figures, practically lift him out of his seat. (He doesn't want to fight Lucas, does he? He doesn't think he could beat Lucas in a fight, does he?)

Dustin tries to keep the peace. “Is now a bad time to point out this entire discussion is in the realm of the theoretical? Have you all forgotten that Chief Hopper won't let anyone – that means you, Mike - see El until next year?”

Mike's about to direct his wrath Dustin's way when his eyes pass over him. He does a double-take and frowns.

“Will? Is everything OK? How're you feeling?”

Through the whole exchange he's been silent, observing; eyes flickering back and forth like he's watching a Hoosiers' game: wild shots at the basket, giant rebounds off the board, flailing limbs trying to establish control over the ball. (Dad shouting: *Box out, damn it! Would it kill you morons to play some defense for a change? Why do they never fucking remember, sorry kid, to box out?*) He's smiling like a dope.

Because for the first time in a long time he feels an uncomplicated love for all of them, a love not clouded by: *Do they see? Do they know? What if one of those wormy, creepy, horrible things wants out? Can I make it to the bathroom in time, before anyone sees?*

He's smiling like a dope, though he can't wrap his head around any of these relationships. He'd never, ever, not in a million years betray Mike; but if really pressed by Dustin or Lucas he might admit, if only to himself, that it's pretty strange Mike's spent a few days with Eleven and one year mooning over her. That after seeing her for barely twenty-four hours he's prepared to spend another year on edge, arguing with his best friends on her behalf. Though he barely knows her, and she can kill him with her mind.

Then there's Lucas dating Max. Dustin hanging out with *Steve*. Where was he when all this was happening? Everyone moving forward while he was frozen in place. While he was being eaten from the inside out.

"I'm good. Just listening."

Now Mike's giving him big Wheeler eyes. *My mom won't let me bring this baby bunny home, this baby bunny that's all on its own and will die if we leave it out here. But your mom is cool. She won't mind, right? It can stay in your bathtub? On your porch? In Castle Byers? You'll take care of it, make sure it's safe? Please, Will. Please. I need your help.*

"They're nice, Max and El. I like both of them. They should definitely come. It'll be fun."

Dustin deflates. Lucas grins and gives him the finger.

"Nyah, nyah, Dustin. Majority rules. *The Party has spoken*. Mike, you'd better set El straight. No girl fights."

They're gearing up for round two (three? four?) when the door to the basement creaks open.

"Boys! Want a snack? I made snickerdoodles! And there's chocolate milk!"

Mrs. Wheeler never burns the bottoms of her cookies. Plus, she always buys the expensive, super fresh milk: the kind that comes in glass bottles and pours out in thick *glugs*, a shake in a mug. He's the first one up the stairs.

\*

He has two notebooks. One is displayed prominently on his bedside table. In it he draws wizards, dragons, rogues and elves. Castles, towers and a medieval village. Shortbows and longbows, longswords and shortwords. Mom examines it when she's home and he's not. Not once has she put it back exactly how he left it. Half the time it's not even on the nightstand, but on his bed, his desk, his chair. Once he found it in the hall closet, once on her bathroom sink.

The other notebook, he keeps under his mattress.

He draws a close-knit pyramid of buildings in a hidden valley, thirteen thousand feet up, nestled in snowy, stony mountains. The air is pure and thin, palpable in its lack of oxygen, making him conscious of each inhale, every exhale. It's a combination monastery, fortress and library, only accessible by horseback or white water river, a place where wizards can study in peace or clerics can gather with the like-minded. Here, he learns and grows stronger.

He draws wooden structures high in the treetops - some elaborate, some simple. Connected by precarious walkways, the only way to reach them from the ground is via free swinging rope ladders that can be swiftly removed. Here, he's an explorer, an adventurer. Or maybe he's a druid, using the forces of nature to drive out monsters and other abominations; watching and guarding, always prepared to

counter-strike.

He draws a thick, satiny ribbon of beach, pebbly with soft pink sand; a shimmering grey-green sea; grassy dunes that rise to scrubby pine woods filled with foxes and badgers, stoats - or at least, what he imagines stoats look like - and wild horses.

(But no deer. During the winter Jonathan puts out salt licks – *They need the nutrients* - but he's skeptical. Even in the thick of winter there are plenty of them. They nose around the remnants of Mom's attempts at a vegetable garden, a garden they've forgotten they ate back in the summer. They huddle in the middle of the road, in the middle of the night, eyes glowing. They startle Mom, even as she keeps an eye out for them. She shrieks and slams on the brakes. They belatedly scamper off, tails flashing, and she swears under her breath, fumbles for a cigarette.

They're not even good to eat. Last year, when almost everyone thought he was dead, a neighbor gave her and Jonathan a slab of venison, to say he was sorry for what had happened. A couple of months after she found him in the Upside Down she took it out of the freezer. Eyed it skeptically, then put on a brave face. *Can't let perfectly good food go to waste.*

Despite ample time on the stove it remained tough and sinewy, tasted like dirt and grass and worms. He wilted under the increasing weight of each bite, the strain of pretending he was still himself. *Jonathan, be honest. I think I really messed up dinner this time. Mom, I'm sorry, but you did. It's terrible.* They gave the rest to Chester and drove to the nearest McDonald's, three towns away.)

He imagines one of those old fashioned places people used to go in the last century. When they had TB but called it something else – consumption. Since it's 1985 and no one is going to force him to sit in a lawn chair for eighteen hours a day, it's not a heavy building, dank and foreboding like in *The Shining* (*Jonathan! I can't believe you took him to see that! He's ten! He's going to have nightmares for weeks! Mom, stop worrying, he's not a baby. Besides, that's what big brothers are for...*). Rather, it's welcoming. Clean, bright and white; open to the sun and wind. It's weird.

At the edge of the beach he draws a vast, circular building resting on a tripod of pillars. The building is made up of horizontal stacks, sometimes five, sometimes seven or ten, of non-interlocking gears. The windows serve as cogs, each facing the water. It's part *Close Encounters* mothership, part wedding cake made by Max, if Max was interested in baking cakes.

His room is at the top, front and center. From his vantage point he sees tanker ships the size of bath toys; the granite lighthouse that erupts from the rocks on the eastern shore, where the beach peters out. Whales breach high in the air, spin round and round, then descend with thunderous splashes. Storm clouds mass on the horizon. He tracks their advance, how they release rain in sheets over the water.

As the sun sets, the three moons are ascendant. From the deck outside his room he watches them criss-cross the cooling, blue-black sky.

Seagulls flat-foot across the beach. They peck at the leavings of the tide: crabs and mussels, seaweed and shells, the occasional tentacled sea creature. He walks towards the lighthouse. His bare feet leave imprints in the wet sand, but the frothy surf curls around his ankles, washes his footprints clean away. Every day in the same spot, crouched in formation, is a group of seagulls that examine him with hard, speculative, hungry (always hungry) eyes.

There are people in the building, at the beach. He knows them. He likes them and they like him back. But when he needs peace their voices fade to white noise, a pleasant background hum that's easy to tune out. Freeing him to focus on the sound of the sea, turning over and over. Rising and falling, pushing and pulling. Like the beat of his heart, forcing blood through his body and sucking it back in. Like his lungs, bringing in the good and expelling the bad. Reminding him he's here. He's alive.

The story is for little kids, but he draws it anyway. His bedroom in Hawkins with a giant coat closet that he can walk through to get wherever he wants to go: the ocean, the mountains, the forest, the places he's imagined but has yet to draw. It's a convenient portal, hidden in plain sight.



In the beginning, he wondered why he'd become enthralled with alternate dimensions, alternate realities. Shouldn't he be content where he is, at the heart of his family circle, safe and cared for, no further need to tremble at shadows. At his reflection in the mirror.

Was something wrong with him? Again?

When he allowed himself to think about it - cautiously, from every angle - he came to understand it was a perfectly sensible to want to temporarily escape his hometown, escape himself. He spent a handful of days in the Upside Down. He spent months in Hawkins - at Mike's and the arcade, the AV lab and class, the sanctuary of his bedroom - living in the alternate dimension of his own body.

In Hawkins, while he slept in his bed, he dug tunnels and formed sinkholes, ruined crops and slaughtered livestock. He gestated mutant dogs and suffocated Hopper in vines. In Hawkins, while he sat in bed, looking at his mom and Mike, he talked to these creatures and told them to attack his friends.

He told them to kill Bob.

His closed casket service was in Maine. Mom missed it. To be with him. *I'm not leaving your side until you're eighteen. Maybe sixteen. But don't hold me to that!*

He understands it's not his fault. He's been told it's not his fault. By everyone (by his mom).

But what they all want to forget is that the Shadow Monster was solid and inside him and he was there too.

They were separate. For days he beat his fists weakly, uselessly against his own brain and bones, his own soul, wailing: *Get out, get out! Leave me alone!*

They were one and the same. It screamed for hours and for weeks he spoke in a whisper. It was burned out of him, and he has the second degree burn to prove it.

He felt what it felt, though he can't truly understand, let alone articulate, what that means. How can he? It was alien and ancient, all

seeing but without any feeling except a wordless *want* that superseded everything, that left him a passenger in his own body. Like the Sphinx came to life and strode out of the Sahara with him riding shotgun. Like a shard of Sauron spent months sleeping in his temporal lobe but woke up, well rested. With a plan.

There are days when he feels totally insubstantial. The slightest puff of wind threatens to reduce him to his trillions of component cells, waft him in as many different directions. On these days, there's a hollow ache behind his ribs, in the small of his back and the arches of his feet. Like when the Shadow Monster fled it took pieces of him with it.

\*

At Friday dinner, he eats mom's desert dry roast potatoes and swampy green beans. Her extra sloppy joes that the two bottom buns he's sandwiched a few spoonfuls between are no match for. Two bottom buns because Jonathan takes both tops from the last two buns.

"You snooze you lose."

"Mom." He draws it out, fake whiny. She giggles and fake frowns, wags a fake disapproving finger at Jonathan.

"You're supposed to look out for him."

Jonathan smirks and takes an extra big bite; through his drippy mouthful he mumbles, "I'm teaching him to think fast." He gives a couple of exaggerated chews. "If you really want some I'm happy to share," and opens his mouth wide.

He stretches his hand across the table, mimes scooping it out of Jonathan's mouth, then lays his palm flat. "Gimme." Jonathan leans forward, ready to let some plop onto his wiggling fingers.

"Absolutely not. I'm going to buy twice as many buns next time. You

can both have the top. We'll give the rest to the birds. Where are your manners? Who raised you? I want to talk to her."

They dissolve into laughter.

"Mom, you sit. You've been on your feet all day."

They wash the dishes. He grabs the spoons while Jonathan retrieves the ice cream and chocolate syrup. They eat Bryers vanilla (*The only ice cream for the Byers*) straight from the container, squeezing syrup on top of their ice cream, then once more into their empty spoons.

Tomorrow is Mom's day off, and she chases her dessert with Wild Turkey. After the second one her face blurs around the edges, she becomes a slightly out of focus version of herself. She lets him leave the room without calling after him: "You feeling good, honey? Anything I can get you?" She forgets to stand in front of his door while he sits in bed, and he has to remind himself to rustle his pages; cough and bounce up and down on the mattress; make sure it squeaks and she knows nothing is amiss.

The food sits in his stomach. Like chunks of boulders, like wads of paper napkins. It sits in his stomach like some of the slugs he knew were inside him but, for whatever reason, never made it out.

When Mom falls asleep - tonight she doesn't avoid her bedroom, but on many evenings she's crashed on the porch swing, her favorite chair across from the television, at the kitchen table, head slumped heavy on her forearms; and Jonathan whispers that he's picking up Nancy but will be back soon, too responsible to sneak around like a teenager (like Nancy); so happy and astonished that he has someone (has Nancy) that he can't help but mention it, even when it's no longer a mystery where he's headed - he pads on soft feet to the bathroom and closes the door inch by inch, only releasing the handle, his breath, when he's sure it will make no sound, not even the gentlest *snick*.

He presses his cheek against the smooth rim of the bathtub, the cool foot of the sink and thinks about winter.

Tonight his stomach roils, rages. He doesn't want to, he has to: stick

his head in the toilet and gag as noiselessly as possible. When it's over, he limits himself to a muted groan of relief; he rests his cheek on the edge of the sticky bowl and looks at what he brought up. What was inside him and now isn't.

Who is he? He used to know. He was Will the Wise, Jonathan's little brother, Mike's best friend and Zombie Boy. He was *Y'know, one of those Byers: Joyce's kid, Lonnie's young 'un*. He was, always and forever, a member of The Party.

Now...he's not so sure. That he's still those things in the way he used to be, that those things are enough for the person he is now.

So he draws. So he dreams.

### **Author's Note:**

The circular building that Will draws is a riff on the [Druzhba Sanatorium](#) in the Crimea, constructed in 1985.

The mountain fortress is based on [the Key Gompa monastery](#) in the Spiti Valley in Himachal Pradesh, India.